



WAYS TO RETAIN TEACHERS

An overview of research-backed best practices for attracting and retaining K-12 staff. This issue encompasses both teacher burnout as well as national trends in workplace behavior.

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Overview

Education continues to face issues with attracting and retaining educators. There is no shortage of literature on the topic nor does the literature suggest greater concern than in prior decades ([see related Google Books Ngram Viewer](#)). While educators are leaving the profession in greater numbers, it is no secret that every other industry is also facing similar issues ([U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#)). Terms such as “quiet quitting” are already common parlance. Literature on the topic has often brought a narrow perspective, focusing on teacher retention rather than broader employee retention. Particularly of note is the concept of “teacher burnout.” While districts must address teacher burnout, it is also important to note and respond to larger workplace trends. Moreover, it is critical that districts analyze and respond to the particular issues and demands of their own employees in addition to looking at larger trends.



Burnout

On the topic of burnout, [NEA's January 12-24 Survey in 2022](#) confirms that educators perceive and experience burnout to a greater degree than in previous years: "90% of members say feeling burned out is a serious problem (67% very serious)." This survey also reiterates a common point raised on the topic by educators: "To address educator burnout, raising educator salaries receives the strongest support (96% support, 81% strongly support), followed by providing additional mental health support for students (94% support), hiring more teachers (93%), hiring more support staff (92%), and less paperwork (90%)." Anyone interested in reducing teacher burnout should examine these evergreen claims seriously. See [Teacher Pay and Teacher Quality by Gareis and Stronge](#) for a summary of related research.

Reducing Burnout

If the above options are not feasible, what is to be done about teacher burnout? [First Aid for Teacher Burnout 2nd Edition by Jenny Grant Rankin](#) draws on multiple studies to propose that a good place to start is by helping educators examine their mindset, remove unnecessary "fluff" to focus on impact, utilize tools and processes to reduce planning time, and build positive relationships with other stakeholders such as admin and community members (2022). Mindset is often addressed through self-care strategies such as the ones proposed by [HeartMath](#) and renewal strategies proposed by the [Center for Courage & Renewal](#). Educators can begin to prioritize impactful strategies and reduce high-effort low-result activities by exploring [VisibleLearningMetaX](#) research. Blended learning strategies such as those expounded upon by [Catlin Tucker](#) can save educators time. Mentoring programs can help educators navigate conversations with administrators and families.

Side Note: Salaries & Class Sizes

An important distinction needs to be made regarding educator salaries and class sizes: while [Visible Learning](#) meta-analysis research suggests that pay and class sizes do not greatly affect student achievement, it does not make a claim about educator retention, job satisfaction, nor the long-term effects of attracting individuals to the profession.

Reaching Employees At Each Stage

Stepping back, consider the professional timeline of your employees. Employees are first attracted to your place of employment, hired, experience onboarding, maintain their work over time, and then leave your organization. At each of these junctures, there are opportunities to help your school have and maintain highly effective educators and staff. Burnout is but one factor that pushes educators out of the field.

Aligning with Potential Employees

First, attracting and hiring educators comes down to ensuring that one's place of work aligns with one's prospective employees. This includes a broad spectrum of workplace and employee characteristics, particularly the benefits and wellness opportunities offered: "Employees have differing needs at different stages of their lives. For instance, a goal for the majority (67 percent) of 26- to 35-year-olds is to buy a home; however, only 11 percent of benefits plans support this. For older generations, saving for retirement is a bigger focus" ([Bruce, 2017](#)) and "Studies show that 66 percent of Gen Z would like a culture built on health and wellness and 42 percent of Gen Z workers prioritize work-life balance over other job perks" ([Carmichael, 2022](#)). On the topic of hiring, alignment is once again important: [Daniel A. Heller in ASCD's Teachers Wanted: Attracting and Retaining Good Teachers](#) posits that philosophy should be the basis of one's hiring practices as hiring teachers that align with your school's philosophy increases their satisfaction with their place of work (2004). Critically consider who your organization currently attracts and who you would like to attract. What would this second group seek?

Side Note: *College Partnerships*

What about partnering with colleges? If you are considering supporting preservice teachers with tuition, ensure that there is a lock-in period to ensure you are getting a return on your investment ([Jacobson, 2020](#)).

Opportunities, Skill Building, & Experimentation

Second, retaining employees in today's world relies on providing opportunities for career progression along with training & development support for their individual goals. Just like the survey on burnout, various studies on workers across multiple industries have shared what causes them to change locations or seek new work. [Carmichael \(2022\)](#) summarizes these findings:

- *"57 percent of U.S. workers want to update their skills, and 48 percent would consider switching jobs to do it."*
- *"80 percent of employees said that learning and development opportunities would increase their engagement at work."*
- *"Workers who feel they have access to the Learning & Development opportunities they need are 21 percent more engaged than workers who don't."*
- *"Employees who see good opportunities to learn and grow at their organization are 3.6 times more likely to report being happy than those who don't."*
- *"71 percent of workers say job training and development increase their job satisfaction."*
- *"91 percent of employees want more training opportunities from their employers."*

Contrary to conventional wisdom, employees are more likely to stay at organizations that actively support their movement within said organizations and experimentation within their roles. [Hellen Tupper and Sarah Ellis in their 2022 Harvard Business Review article titled "It's Time to Reimagine Employee Retention"](#) describe this best:

Investing time and effort in their employees' career development is often at odds with the metrics they're measured against... By keeping the "best" people on their team, they achieve the best outcomes. However, this is often to the detriment of individuals' career development and the organization's ability to access its own talent. The unfortunate outcome is that the people managers most want to retain feel constrained and become more likely to leave, risking the performance metrics they were so keen to protect in the first place.

The solution to the career development conflict this creates lies in taking a fresh look at how retention is managed. Managers need help with three things. First, they need help shifting the focus of career conversations from promotion to progression and developing in different directions. Second, they need help creating a culture and structure that supports career experiments. Finally, managers need to be rewarded not for retaining people on their teams but retaining people (and their potential) across the entire organization.

For administrators looking to retain educators and other staff, this means providing opportunities to skill-build across subject areas, permission to try new approaches in their classroom, communication about career openings paired with unbiased hiring for higher-level roles, and building a common understanding at the administrative level that the goal should be to retain people within the district and not within the department or school ([Baker and Zuech, 2022](#)). Administrators may even find it beneficial to coach staff on long-term career goals ([Friefeld, 2014](#)). Self-Determination Theory as described by [Ryan and Deci in 2017](#) helps illustrate exactly why employees are desiring these conditions: by meeting each employee's basic needs for competence (sense of achievement and progress), relatedness (sense of belonging and importance in work), and autonomy (sense of control), employees are more motivated to overcome hurdles. Training and opportunities support not only experienced educators but also beginning teachers. See [Tina Boogren's Supporting Beginning Teachers by Marzano Resources](#) for more information.

Pulse Checks & Exit Interviews

Third, administration seeking to retain employees must frequently listen to and address the needs of staff, including staff that are leaving. Formally or informally, managers must measure employee morale and needs to improve retention ([Kirby, 2023](#)). For K-12 schools, administrators can employ frequent "reality checks" or "pulse checks" covering questions such as "What's going particularly well for you this year? What concerns/issues do you have at this point? What can I do to best support you right now? If you could get some professional development right now, what would it be? Anything else?" ([ASCD, 21015](#)). Listening to staff needs can help you identify why staff would want to leave your particular district; this is critical as these causes are often context-dependent. This is especially critical for staff that are leaving the profession. Exit interviews are a powerful and rarely used tool in K-12 Education to understand why your staff leave ([Parker, 2021](#)).

Solutions

What Administrators Can Do Today

In short, administrators looking to increase their staff retention should:

- Provide teachers with resources, strategies, and training to combat profession-specific burnout.
- Ensure that their school philosophy is transparently broadcasted in order to attract educators that align well with their workplace.
- Work with HR and other stakeholders to identify in-demand benefits such as well-being support, mental health support, and tuition reimbursement (especially if seeking younger staff).
- Listen to and support the long-term career goals of educators such as educators wishing to change roles or subjects. This can be done through training, coaching, and transparent communication about job opportunities and interests.
- Allow educators to experiment with classroom strategies and approaches free of punishment.
- Frequently check in on staff well-being via pulse checks, surveys, and conversations.
- Interview and learn from employees leaving the school, district, and/or profession.

How We Can Help

These ideas are not always easy nor quick to implement. Black Hills Special Services Cooperative can support you and your district in the following ways:

- Reducing burnout by providing training, book studies, and coaching on Courage & Renewal, Visible Learning research, and Blended learning strategies.
- Consulting on & developing personalized training for staff on their long-term goals through the TIE pathways system.
- Implementing formal pulse checks and observations to identify potential areas contributing to teacher loss.



[Contact Us](#)

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